

No sign of breakthrough in N Ireland peace talks

BELFAST, Oct 22: Northern Ireland's main political parties met with US mediator George Mitchell here today in a last-ditch attempt to save the province's stalled peace process, reports AFP.

With no sign of a likely breakthrough, there was growing speculation that Mitchell would wrap up his review of the peace process on Friday or Saturday.

However, observers said the former US senator was unlikely to simply give up on the negotiations and could return to Northern Ireland next month.

Mitchell was called in by the British and Irish governments early last month to kick-start the peace process, which has stalled over the issues of setting up a power-sharing government in the British-ruled province and disarming paramilitary groups.

The pro-British-rule Ulster Unionist Party refused to sit in the devolved government with the anti-British Sinn Féin, political wing of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), until the IRA began handing in its weapons.

But seven weeks of talks here and in London have failed to make a breakthrough.

"The core issue of whether or not we can establish the institutions has not been solved yet," Sinn Féin negotiator Alex Maskey told the BBC.

"That's why we are saying that it is unlikely at this point that the (Good Friday)

Agreement will be implemented," he added.

Mitchell brokered the Good Friday Agreement, the peace accord which paved the way for a devolved administration, in April 1998.

Two main options are left open to Mitchell, the Irish Times newspaper said.

He could conclude his mission is impossible, return to the United States and leave the onus for progress with the new British minister in charge of Northern Ireland, Peter Mandelson.

Or he could issue an interim report and return to the province later, possibly next month, with a set of specific proposals for the parties to consider.

Observers say there is also a slim chance that he could extend this round of talks if either of the rival sides come up with new proposals at Friday's meeting.



Chinese President Jiang Zemin (L) and the Queen shake hands as Prince Philip (R) looks on at the steps of Buckingham Palace yesterday.

Moscow, Washington break up ABM talks without progress

MOSCOW, Oct 22: The latest round of US-Russian arms reduction talks broke up here today still deadlocked over Washington's demand to rework a key treaty that would allow it to build a hi-tech nuclear rocket defence shield, reports AFP.

John Holm, US Under-Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, and his opposite number, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Berdennikov, made no progress despite two days of talks, the ITAR-TASS news agency reported.

Russia made clear its continued refusal to amend the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, saying any changes "would make a nonsense of" negotiations on the START III arms reduction treaty.

The Russian foreign ministry released a statement say-

ing the ABM treaty "is of decisive importance to the disarmament process."

US Senate passes ban on abortion procedure

WASHINGTON, Oct 22: Often heated rhetoric filled the ornate US Senate chamber Thursday as lawmakers passed a measure banning a rare and controversial late-term abortion method that opponents blast as "partial-birth abortion," reports AFP.

Under the procedure -- which is used after the 20th week of pregnancy and known medically as intact dilation and extraction -- doctors cause a foetus to be partly delivered through the birth canal and then remove its brain.

"Any other reduction in strategic arms is possible only if the ABM treaty remains untouched," the statement continued.

The talks marked the third time in three months that senior US officials have come to Moscow seeking to push forward stalled disarmament talks, two previous attempts serving only to fuel Russian resentment.

Moscow refuses to sanction US-proposed amendments to the treaty, which bars the United States and Russia from building or deploying nationwide defence systems that could shoot down incoming ballistic missiles.

Washington wants changes so it can forge ahead with a rocket shield to protect against a limited attack by so-called rogue states like Iran, Iraq and North Korea.

Y'slav opposition fears plot to assassinate its leader

BELGRADE, Oct 22: The Yugoslav opposition, seeking the overthrow of President Slobodan Milosevic and his regime, voiced fears Thursday that Milosevic's influential wife Mirjana Markovic was plotting to kill its leader, reports AFP.

Two thousand protesters took to Belgrade streets Thursday, joining thousands more elsewhere in Serbia who took part in rallies calling for Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic to step down.

Those rallying in Belgrade braved the cold weather to continue their daily rallies against the Yugoslav regime which have been organised by the opposition Alliance for Change since September 21.

The Alliance for Change umbrella group is dominated by Zoran Djindjic's Democratic Party.

In the southern Serbian town of Nis, vice president of the Democrats, Zoran Zivkovic, speaking to a crowd of some

5,000 protesters, called for a judicial enquiry into fears that Milosevic's wife Markovic was heading up a plot to assassinate Djindjic.

Djindjic claimed Wednesday that he had been under surveillance for two weeks and said that could be a sign that such an attempt would be made.

Markovic strongly criticised Djindjic in an interview in the latest edition of an Italian Catholic weekly.

Markovic called the Democratic Party leader a "traitor" and a "collaborator of my people's killers," in the interview she gave to the Catholic weekly Familia Christiana.

Markovic, head of the neo-communist Yugoslav Left (JUL) which is allied with Milosevic in the Serbian and Yugoslav government, said that "those who collaborated with the enemy during the bombings," had been ordered "to provoke a civil war by calling on the population to protest in the streets."



The intact mammoth body recovered October 17 from the permafrost is believed to be around 20,000 years old and from a species that became extinct 10,000 years ago. Experts sketch hopes of resurrecting the species and cloning the mammoth if DNA can be extracted from the carcass.

Experts sketch hope of cloning woolly mammoth

PARIS, Oct 22: Experts today sketched hopes of resurrecting a species that became extinct 10,000 years ago after they examined an intact body of a woolly mammoth from the northern Siberian permafrost, reports AFP.

Cloning of the mammoth could be attempted if DNA can be retrieved from the carcass, which was recovered last Sunday and has been kept safely in freezing cold ever since to prevent composition, they suggested.

Bernard Buigues, whose team Polar Circle Expeditions extracted the beast, described how bold Russian pilots raced against time and scant fuel resources to fly the mammoth, enclosed in its original icy coffin, to the town of Khatanga, 250 kilometres from the site.

Dick Moll, a Dutch researcher and member of the team, told the press conference the discovery was "a dream come true."

Thanks to carbon-dating of the animal's hair and bones, the team believes it died 20,380 years ago, give or take a hundred years. It died at around 47 years of age.

The mammoth will be installed in a laboratory dug in the permafrost at the base of a cliff at Khatanga.

The big question, Moll said, was whether the animal can be cloned -- reviving a species that has been extinct for 10 million years.

He believed that with the right technology and DNA material, cloning was possible. "This might take 10 or 20 years, maybe longer."

It will take months of painstaking preparation, gently defrosting the body with hairdryers but keeping it chill, to find out whether this is the case, Buigues cautioned.

"I am sure that we will find things that we did not expect," he said. "We may find an explanation for the disappearance of the mammoth... (and) this study will also bring us closer to the culture and lifestyle of our recent ancestors."

Another possibility -- also theoretical -- would be to recover sperm from the animal's testes and to artificially inseminate an elephant.

There is also the risk that Zharkov's surprises may not be all pleasant. The team is taking precautions against the risk that entombed in the carcass are viruses and parasites that have lain dormant for thousands of years and could replicate when exposed to a warmer environment.

The laboratory will have to be hermetically sealed, and researchers will wear full protective suits and take showers after touching the body, Buigues said.

Zharkov could be the start of something big, Buigues said he had tips from local fishermen and hunters that there were other preserved remains in the region, and added he knew of "two other sites where there is probably something more than bones."

Prehistoric horses, wolverines, deer and rhinoceroses may be buried, and if they can be found -- and funding becomes available -- they could join Zharkov in a "Museum of the Cold" at Khatanga, he said.

But he admitted that he had yet to agree with the Russians on ownership if DNA is found and is commercially exploited.

New Pak ruler for cooperation with Gulf states

DUBAI, Oct 22: Pakistan's new strongman, General Pervez Musharraf, has reassured Gulf leaders about his desire to maintain good ties with them, reports AFP.

Musharraf called Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan of the United Arab Emirates and told him about "the situation in Pakistan and the desire of the new leadership to continue cooperation with the federation," UAE newspapers reported Friday.

Sheikh Zayed replied by "wishing General Musharraf success in his efforts aimed at ensuring the security and stability of the Pakistani people," they said.

The UAE foreign ministry said on Saturday it hoped that "security and stability" would prevail in Pakistan after the military coup.

"The UAE has followed with interest the latest developments in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, in view of the friendly ties marked by mutual respect and Islamic brotherhood," a ministry spokesman told the official WAM news agency.

Musharraf also telephoned Bahraini Emir Hamad bin Issa al-Khalifa to inform him of Pakistan's desire to continue its cooperation with Manama, the official GNA agency reported.

Pakistan's ambassador to Riyadh said Wednesday that Musharraf, who seized power on October 12, wanted to maintain good relations with the Saudi kingdom.

He said Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal had likewise assured him that the "brotherly relations between the two nations would not be affected by internal political change in Pakistan."

The oil-rich Gulf states are home to hundreds of thousands of Pakistani expatriate workers and are key aid donors to Islamabad.

Indian villagers pray for safety of Nawaz Sharif

JATI UMRAN, India, Oct 22: A Sikh temple in Jati Umrana, a dusty hamlet on the Indian side of the Punjab border with Pakistan, has been filled with people praying fervently since last week's military coup in Islamabad, reports Reuters.

Jati Umrana is the ancestral village of overthrown Pakistan prime minister Nawaz Sharif. The temple was his family home which was converted into a Sikh shrine after the Sharif family moved to Lahore before the partition of India in 1947.

The people of Jati Umrana are worried for Sharif's life now that Islamabad has a military ruler.

"We know what General Zia-ul-Haq did with Bhutto after imposing martial law," said Arjan Singh, an old friend of the Sharif family. "There is fear that history would be repeated."

Zia-ul-Haq toppled former Pakistan prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in a coup in 1977, and then had Bhutto executed after a controversial conviction for conspiring in the murder of a political opponent. Sharif's predecessor, Benazir Bhutto was Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's daughter.

But while the coup sparked worldwide consternation, many Pakistanis appeared optimistic that the new ruler would bring about positive change.



US actor Tom Hanks (L) poses with singer Melissa Etheridge after receiving the Film Actor award at GQ's 1999 Men of the Year Awards ceremony on Thursday in New York.

4 anti-apartheid militants get amnesty for killing S African

JOHANNESBURG, Oct 22: Four anti-apartheid militants convicted of murdering a white farmer during the violent days of white minority rule received amnesty Friday, reports AP.

The men will be released immediately, said Phila Ngumbi, spokesman for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's amnesty panel.

Hendrik Leeuw, Daniel Magoda, Meshack May and Sebola Petrus -- members of the black militant Azanian People's Liberation Army -- were convicted for the 1992 murder of a Free State farmer, JJ Fourie.

Their sentences ranged from 11 to 15 years. Their racial identities were unclear.

The men testified that they were part of operation "Great Storm" of APLA to drive the white farming community off the land so they could reclaim the territory. The Pan Africanist Congress and APLA testified that "Great Storm" involved the killing of farmers and stealing their weapons.

The panels has granted amnesty to nearly 400 people, and has dismissed more than 5,000 applications because the applicants denied guilt, offered no proof their actions were politically inspired or were accused of offenses that were not considered human rights abuses.

Releasing its major finding last year, the Truth Commission blamed most apartheid-era human rights abuses on the former white regime, but said black anti-apartheid activists also committed atrocities.

But the panel said Leeuw, Magoda, May and Petrus fully disclosed the facts of the crime and had acted with a political motive -- the two main requirements for amnesty.

ROK, Japanese ministers to meet today in Cheju

SEOUL, Oct 22: Cabinet ministers from Japan and South Korea will this weekend meet on a resort island for key economic and political talks a year after the two countries vowed to sweep away decades of antagonism, reports AFP.

Around 20 ministers from both countries will gather Saturday in Cheju Island off the south of Korea for the second in a landmark series of meetings aimed at boosting economic and political ties into the next century.

But despite the goodwill, the round looked set to stir up lingering ill-feeling here towards Korea's former colonial master with at least one anti-Japanese protest being planned.

The delegations to the two-day talks -- expected to center on trade and North Korean issues -- will be headed by the prime ministers of each East Asian power: Japan's Keizo Obuchi and South Korea's premier Kim Jong-Pil.

"This meeting will be bigger than the first with more ministers taking part to work out ways of increasing cooperation between the two countries in the 21st century," Kim's office said in a statement Friday.

"It will provide an opportunity for the two countries to bolster friendly relations and will also help build friendship and mutual trust between the ministers of the two nations," it said.

High on the wide-ranging agenda for the talks will be communist North Korea following its landmark agreement with the United States to suspend missile testing in return for an easing of decades-old sanctions.

The two regional allies of the United States are expected to back the detente process while Japan intends to outline its plans to consider resuming charter flights to North Korea as the first step of easing sanctions.

Scientists developing test to detect mad cow disease

WASHINGTON, Oct 22: Scientists are developing a blood test they hope can be used to detect mad cow disease and similar brain illnesses in animals and humans, reports AP.

The test, developed by private and government researchers, detects the presence of abnormal proteins called prions that cause a group of diseases known as transmissible spongiform encephalopathies, or TSE.

It has been successfully used on TSE illnesses in sheep, elk, mule deer and hamsters.

Additional research, which will probably take at least a year, must be done to ensure the test is reliable enough to be used for diagnostic purposes in humans and other animals, said Mary Jo Schmitt, a scientist at the Agriculture Department's National Animal Disease Center in Ames, Iowa.

So far, from what we've seen it looks very promising," she said Thursday.

Testing for TSE diseases is now done by taking a sample of brain or glandular tissue, usually after death.

The blood test likely would be used first in Britain. The best known TSE is mad cow disease, which has been linked with a variant of the fatal brain condition known as Cruetzfeldt-Jakob.

At least 43 people have died of that strain of Cruetzfeldt-Jakob in Britain since 1995.

Americans who traveled frequently to Britain during the mad cow crisis have been banned from donating blood in the United States.

There is no known cow disease in US cattle, but sheep are susceptible to a related condition called scrapie and other forms of TSE infect elk, mule deer and mink.

USDA filed this week for a patent on the blood test.

Thousands rally for independence in Indonesia's Sulawesi province

JAKARTA, Oct 22: Thousands of students rallied in Makassar, the capital of Indonesia's South Sulawesi province, today to demand an independent state of Sulawesi, television reported, says AFP.

The 15,000 protesters, many waving green flags bearing a map of Sulawesi island, gathered at the Mandala Monument square in Makassar, private SCTV television said.

Pak lawyer challenges state of emergency in court

KARACHI, Oct 22: An independent lawyer has defied an edict by Pakistan's military rulers and filed a petition in the high court challenging the state of emergency imposed by the army, court sources said today, reports AFP.

Lawyer Sohail Hameed filed the petition in the Sindh High Court, challenging the Provisional Constitutional Order by which army chief General Pervez Musharraf suspended the constitution.

"It is unconstitutional... it is against Islamic laws and teachings," Hameed said.

"Corruption and other ills were there, politicians fooled the masses... there was looting and plunder. But even in that situation, the constitution cannot be suspended," he said, demanding the act be declared "illegal."

A divisional bench headed by Sindh chief justice Nazim Hussain Siddiqui and Judge Ghulam Rabbani heard the petition.

The court sought advice from Sharifuddin Pirzada, a constitutional lawyer, but no dates were set for proceedings.

Musharraf took control of Pakistan on October 12, assuming the powers of chief executive and ordered that all courts would continue to function and exercise their powers and jurisdiction, but the state of emergency could not be challenged.

Businesses, farmers demand compensation for N-accident

TOKYO, Oct 22: A Japanese local government, farmers and business groups today demanded 1.97 billion yen (19 million dollars) in compensation over a major nuclear accident, officials said, reports AFP.

Noboru Shimizu, mayor of Hitachinaka city, along with farm cooperatives and chambers of commerce made the demand to JCO Co. Ltd., owner of the plant in Tokaimura, 120 km northeast of Tokyo.

"We would like the plant to take our demand seriously," the mayor was quoted as telling plant officials when the complainants visited the factory in Tokaimura, which is near Hitachinaka.

The world's worst nuclear accident since Chernobyl in 1986 was triggered on September 30 when three JCO workers illegally used steel buckets to pour 16 kilograms (35 pounds) of uranium into a precipitation tank.

"The accident caused tourism-related cancellations and losses and is still affecting businesses in our city," said Yasuyuki Horio, an official at Hitachinaka's business bureau.

"The damage is currently estimated at 1.97 billion yen and a final figure may be bigger than the present estimate," the official said.

Queen Noor leads cancer march

AMMAN, Oct 22: Jordan's Queen Noor today led more than 80,000 people, including top Arab film and stage stars, in a march to raise funds for poor people stricken with cancer in memory of King Hussein, organisers said.

"Between 80,000 and 100,000 took part in the march which has helped raise one quarter of a million dinars (352,112 dollars)," Sahar Masharqa, of Al-Amal Cancer Centre which organised the event, told AFP.

The march was named after King Hussein who died on February 7 after a seven-month battle with cancer of the lymph gland.

Dozens of Arab film, stage and television stars including Syria's number one comedian Doreid Lahham and Egyptian actress Saliya al-Omari, a goodwill ambassador for the United Nations, joined Queen Noor on the six-kilometre trek from Al-Husseini Sports City to Al-Amal Cancer Centre in Amman and back.

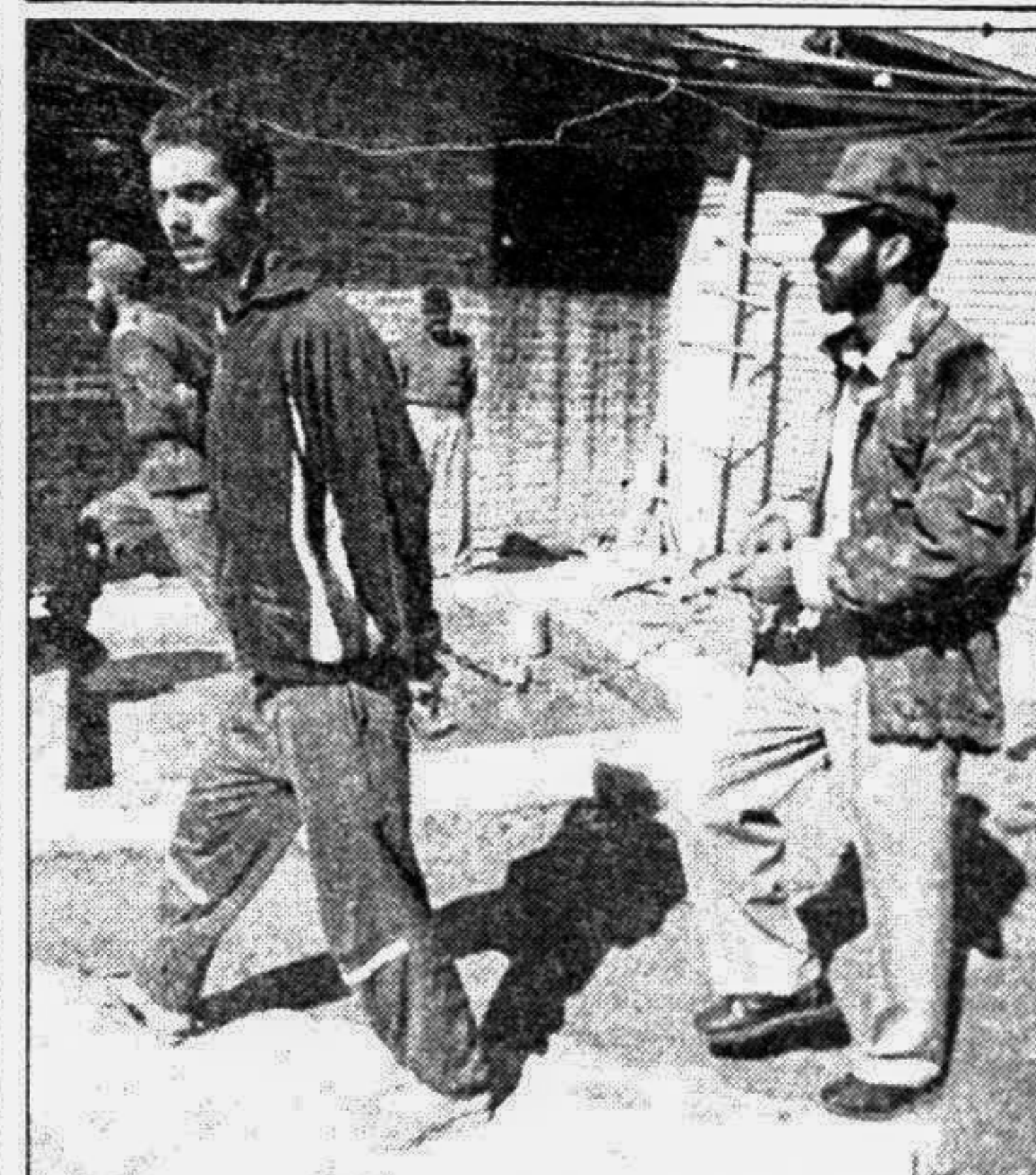
India bans use of fixed dose Vitamin B from 2001

NEW DELHI, Oct 22: Government has prohibited use of fixed dose combinations of vitamin B complex for humans with effect from January 1, 2001, as they do not have the therapeutic properties they are claimed to possess, reports PTI.

The health ministry issued a gazette notification on October 14, prohibiting use of fixed dose combinations of vitamin B1, B2, and B12 from January 1, 2001 for human use, an official release said.

At present, the combinations are available as injections, tablets and capsules.

The government's decision follows recommendation of the drugs technical advisory board, under the drugs and cosmetics act, 1940, to weed out irrational drugs.



An Indian policeman (R) escorts a militant in Srinagar yesterday. Four militants of the banned Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, who according to police were involved in the recent bombing in Kashmir, were arrested. Harkat-ul-Mujahideen has made no comment regarding the arrests.

US energy secy to visit India Oct 26-28

WASHINGTON, Oct 22: Energy Secretary Bill Richardson will travel to India next week to discuss energy issues with senior members of India's new government, the Energy Department announced Thursday, reports AP.

Richardson's visit will focus on potential partnerships in developing clean energy technologies. He will also discuss US-India relations.

The trip, from Tuesday to Thursday, will be the first visit to India by a member of President Bill Clinton's Cabinet since India's new government was formed Oct 3.

While Richardson was to focus on energy issues in his public appearances, including a trip to an energy efficient water treatment plant, his private discussions will include the recent military coup in Pakistan and concerns about India and Pakistan nuclear weapons programmes.

The White House announced Wednesday that it is prepared to permanently waive trade sanctions that were imposed on India and Pakistan last year after they conducted nuclear bomb tests.

The United States said it was not ready to lift the sanctions against Pakistan. That decision has become clouded by the failure of Pakistan's new military ruler to give a timetable for the return of democracy.

Security Council approves UN force for S Leone

UNITED NATIONS, Oct 22: The Security Council decided on Friday to send a force of 6,000 UN troops to Sierra Leone to support the July 7 peace agreement which brought an end to one of the most brutal wars in Africa, reports AFP.

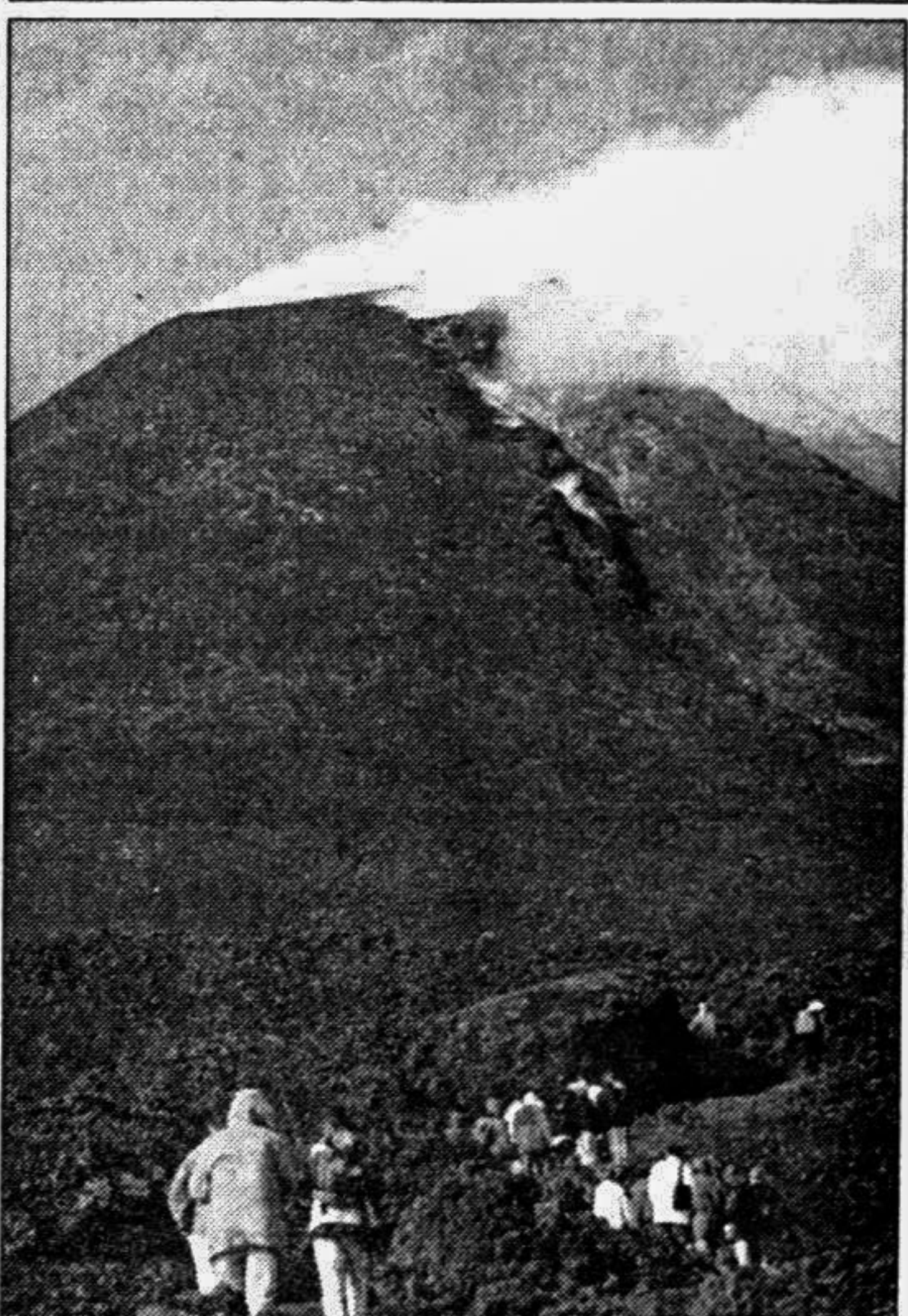
The UN contingent will work alongside the 10,000-strong Nigerian-led West African force ECOMOG with a tough mandate to disarm and demobilise an estimated 45,000 ex-combatants.

It will also monitor the ceasefire which President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah's forces signed on May 18 with the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and which led to the July 7 accord, formally ending nine years of civil war.

It will operate under Chapter Seven of the UN Charter, enabling it to use force if necessary to protect its own personnel and "citizens under imminent threat of physical violence."

Its tasks include facilitating humanitarian assistance to the people of Sierra Leone, more than three million of whom -- two-thirds of the population -- have been displaced by conflict.

The force will also provide support for elections under the constitution.



Tourists climb Mount Etna Thursday, while smoke rises up from the top of Europe's tallest and most active volcano, that gushed lava late Wednesday in the latest and most spectacular display from an active phase that began early this year.